

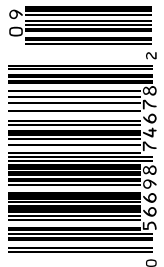
UNAFRAID TO HOPE

STACEY ABRAMS ON SOCIAL POWER
AND POLITICAL FREEDOM



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faith in action for social justice



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"THE MOST COMMON FEAR IS THAT OUR KIDS WON'T BE OK."

Raising the Coronavirus Generation

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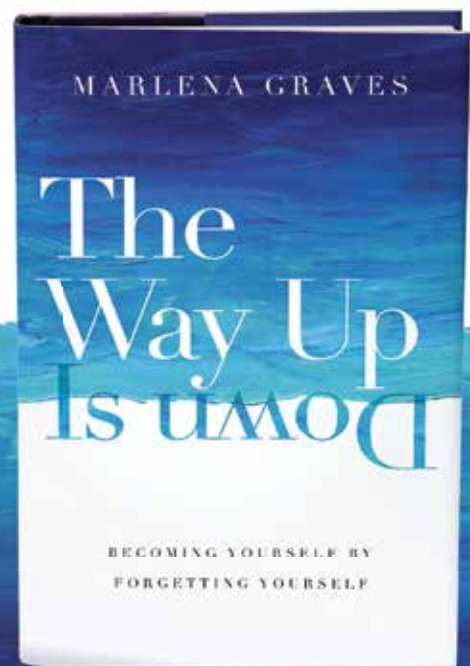
The Life of Action and Contemplation

"In *The Way Up Is Down*, Marlena reminds us that we serve the world well when we are emptied out. Through powerful stories and thoughtful prompts, she asks us to consider what it means to follow a Jesus who often does what we least expect—who serves and loves in a way that turns everything upside down."

Kaitlin Curtice, Potawatomi author and speaker



Marlena Graves



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From the Editor

If the majority ruled, Stacey Abrams would be governor of Georgia. Abrams officially lost the 2018 gubernatorial race by fewer than 55,000 votes—after her opponent, Georgia secretary of state (and now governor) Brian Kemp, improperly purged more than 340,000 voters from the state's rolls. Lawsuits also charged Kemp, who oversaw his own election, with disallowing the registrations of 50,000 Georgians—less than 10 percent of whom were white—due to minor discrepancies in the spelling of their names.

Abrams, who now works to ensure free and fair elections through her voting-rights group Fair Fight, argues in this issue that the problematic Georgia race stands as a warning about those who are attempting to use similar corrupt and immoral tactics in this fall's presidential election. Ensuring that people can exercise their right to vote, as Adam Russell Taylor explains in his column, is a test of the moral claims of our faith as much as it is crucial for the health of our democracy.

RESPONSE

Facts and Factions

In "Harboring a Culture of Hate" (August 2020), Eric Martin explained how U.S. Catholic bishops' failure to condemn swastikas, the Confederate flag, and other racist imagery has created space for a white power faction to exist in their church. While some readers, including Mim Lee [f](#), found it "irresponsible" to "call out one church" when many different denominations have extremist members, others noted that "we cannot fix what we do not know or what we deny is happening" (Bridget Higginbotham [f](#)). Stephanie Sipe [f](#) suggested readers who feel defensive "take a deep dive into [Roman Catholic] history, specifically in the U.S. It's not a pretty picture."

Write us: response@sojo.net



"FAITH IS THE FIRST FACTOR IN A LIFE DEVOTED TO SERVICE."

Mary McLeod Bethune
American educator and civil rights activist

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Danny Duncan Collum

In 1978, Danny Duncan Collum published his first piece in *Sojourners*. Then a member of *Sojourners'* intentional Christian community, he was assigned to housing renovation, "work at which I was woefully inept," he admits. "[Art director] Ed Spivey asked me to write a movie review for the magazine, and I turned out to be better at that." His column in this issue explores how U.S. media functions both as "a corporate tool to force ordinary Americans to accept their own economic exploitation" and as a tool for resistance (p. 42).



Valerie Bridgeman

After four decades of preaching and biblical scholarship, Valerie Bridgeman attributes her "sense of curiosity and justice" to her mother, a teacher and pillar of her rural community. Bridgeman grew up on a farm in Alabama, "in the shadow of Bull Connor's Birmingham," and now serves as dean and vice president for academic affairs at Methodist Theological School in Ohio. "The world I grew up in doesn't look much different than today," she says. "Equity and justice for everyone is a Jesus project" (p. 48).

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0.00006%

National fraud rate for
mail-in ballots over the
past 20 years

17
million

Minimum number of names
purged from voting rolls
from 2016 to 2018

21
million

Number of U.S. citizens
without government-issued
photo identification

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The mission of *Sojourners* magazine is to inspire hope and action by articulating the biblical call to racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship.

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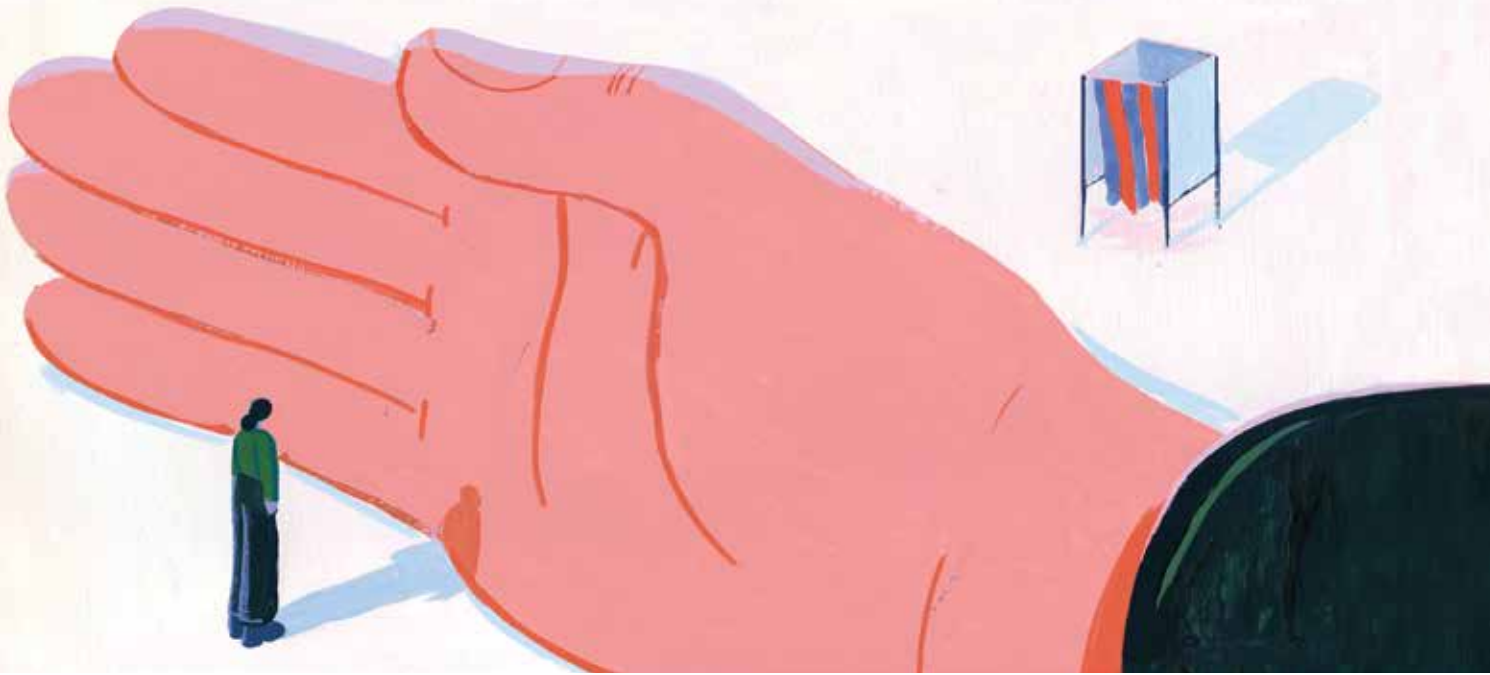
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1

MOBILIZING HOPE

BY ADAM RUSSELL TAYLOR

LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR... WHOM?

Voter suppression is real, and voter fraud is an exaggerated myth. America should be alarmed about these basic truths, because the reality of voter suppression and the dangerous lie of voter fraud represent a real threat to the legitimacy of the November election and the health of our democracy, which was sick long before the devastating arrival of COVID-19.

In June, Georgia's primary exposed glaring problems and injustices that do not bode well for the November general election. People in Atlanta—particularly the parts that are predominantly African American—experienced onerous waiting times due to failures with new voting machines, ill-equipped poll workers, and the secretary of state's failure of leadership. This followed the debacle in Wisconsin, where the Republican-controlled legislature insisted

**"OUR NATION HAS
BEEN IN A GOLD
CIVIL WAR."**

“WE ARE MOBILIZING CLERGY AND CHURCHES TO HOLD ELECTION OFFICIALS ACCOUNTABLE.”

on an in-person primary at the height of the pandemic, forcing people to choose between their health and their right to vote.

The U.S. prides itself as being a beacon of democracy, and yet instead of making it easy for every eligible citizen to vote, some elected officials are erecting barriers to make voting more difficult, which they try to justify with spurious claims of voter fraud. For example, in April President Trump admitted why he and many Republicans oppose the expansion of voting by mail, saying that “Republicans should fight very hard when it comes to state wide mail-in voting. Democrats are clamoring for it. Tremendous potential for voter fraud, and for whatever reason, doesn’t work out well for Republicans.” In other words, according to Trump, making it easier for people to vote, even amid a pandemic, disadvantages Republicans.

This is a moral crossroads for our nation and for the Republican Party in particular. Does it want to be the party that can only win national elections through

voter suppression, or will it actually try to win over a majority of the electorate? The Religious Right and Christian nationalists seemingly only believe in democracy when it suits them. Now that a majority white, Christian nation is in the rearview mirror, the only strategy left to maintain their so-called “biblical values” agenda is to suppress the votes of the only part of the U.S. that is more church-going and religious than they are: African Americans.

Through the Lawyers and Collars campaign (lawyersandcollars.org), Sojourners—in partnership with the National African American Clergy Network—is fighting to ensure that the ballots of Black voters will be cast and counted without interference. We are mobilizing clergy and churches to hold election officials accountable for a free, fair, and safe election, and we will provide a moral presence at polling sites to ensure that all people are able to exercise their constitutional right to vote. Our nation has been in a cold civil war that may not withstand a highly contested election—let alone one that people feel has been stolen. It is imperative that we ensure the vote reflects the will of the people. Otherwise, “liberty and justice for all” will increasingly become hollow and meaningless, and we will have failed not only a test of our democracy but also a test of our Christian discipleship. We invite you to join the growing movement of moral resistance to voter suppression. ✦



Adam Russell Taylor is executive director of Sojourners.



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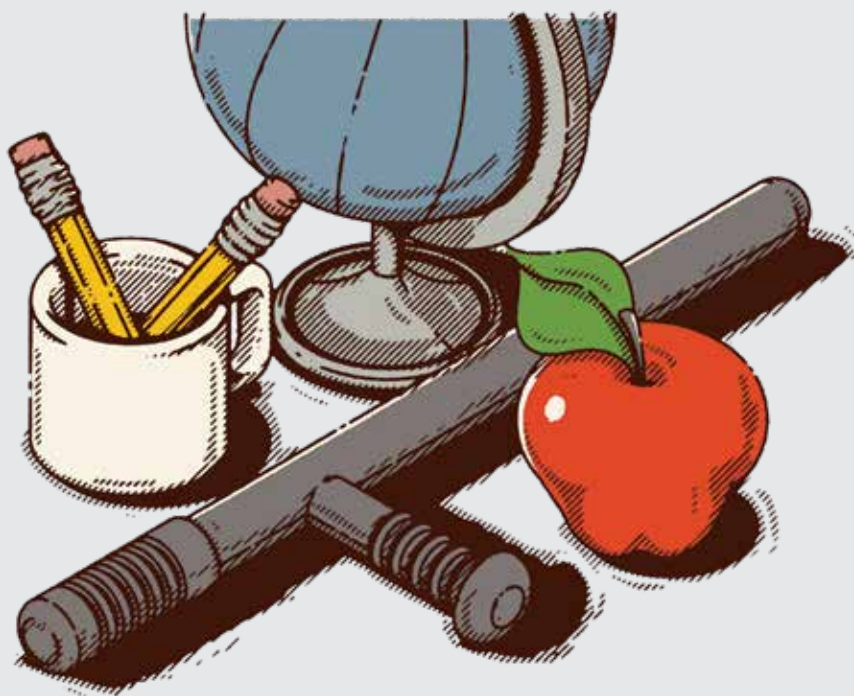


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HOW TO CREATE SECURE SCHOOLS WHERE KIDS THRIVE

Hint: Cops are not part of the equation.



2

It is time for radical change. This summer Black students in Oakland, Calif., demonstrated they deserve it—schools without police. After a 10-year organizing effort, students of the Black Organizing Project were victorious. The Oakland school board voted unanimously to pass the “George Floyd Resolution to Eliminate the Oakland Schools Police Department,” which will dismantle the school police department and redirect \$2.5 million to pupils’ needs. Like students across the country, Oakland scholars want to reimagine safety because too many of them have been dehumanized, disrespected, and criminalized by police in their schools.

Following the brutal murder of Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers in May, the United States has seen a surge in progress in the movement for police-free schools. While this demand is not new, the moment made it real.

The Minneapolis school board led the way when it unanimously voted to end its contract with the police department. Then Portland. Then Denver. Then Charlottesville, Rochester, Milwaukee, and San Francisco.

Fueled by Black and brown students, the police-free schools movement asserts that removing police from schools will increase students' chance to thrive and feel safe from state violence. The presence of police in schools increases the chances of youth interaction with the criminal legal system. Whether we call them "school resource officers" or police, they enforce the criminal code. Moreover, police too often aggressively suppress what they perceive to be disobedience or disorder. They ticket, arrest, and violently impose their will upon young people.

Removing police from schools is only the first step. As communities demand that school boards end contracts with and defund the police, they demand the funding be reinvested in resources that make students safe. Developing a permanent funding stream for school social workers, trained counselors, restorative justice programs, mental health resources, and other practices creates secure schools where young people can thrive. Research and the experiences of young people of color have taught us that having police in schools creates a toxic climate. Cops are not part of the equation regarding the safety of young people in their schools.

In Denver, the school board ended the district's contract with the police department and voted to invest in students. The school board's resolution calls for a 25 percent reduction of school resource officers by December 2020 and the complete elimination of school resource officers in all of Denver's public schools by June 2021. It directs the superintendent of Denver Public Schools to reallocate money used for school resource officers toward social workers, counselors, restorative justice, and more.

For two decades, Advancement Project National Office, a multiracial, nonprofit civil rights organization, has supported Padres y Jóvenes Unidos, our Denver-based partner, in its campaign to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline and defend equal access of all students to high-quality public schools that prepare them for college, regardless of race, income, or immigration status. Members of Padres y Jóvenes Unidos have learned through experience that, for many Black and brown youth, the presence of police in schools disrupts learning environments. A culture clash exists between law enforcement and the

"REMOVING POLICE FROM SCHOOLS IS ONLY THE FIRST STEP."

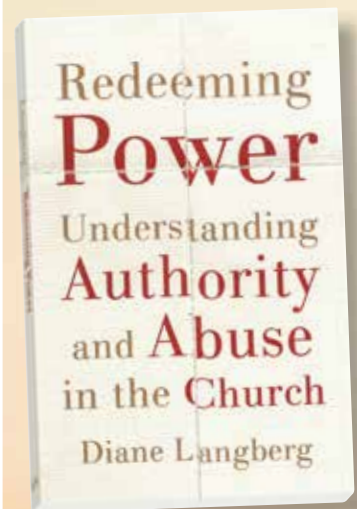
learning environment: Police enforce criminal laws, while schools are supposed to nurture students.

This work set the stage for the police-free schools campaign and the publication of "We Came to Learn: A Call to Action for Police-Free Schools," a report by Advancement Project and the Alliance for Educational Justice, as well as the #AssaultAt mapping program that charts incidents of students assaulted by police at school. Ahead are innovative opportunities to disarm school personnel, decriminalize age-appropriate student behavior, delegitimize over-policing as a safety mechanism, and invest in counselors, social workers, nurses, and others trained to de-escalate high-stress situations.

As we seek to create safe learning environments for young people, it is important to remember: There is no evidence that school police officers make students safer. Increased police presence in schools is linked to increases in school-based arrests for minor, age-appropriate behaviors. The most effective methods to improve school climates instill a sense of community throughout the campus. Police do not do this. It is time that we heed the demands of young people who have sounded the alarm by calling for police-free schools. ♦

Judith Browne Dianis is executive director of Advancement Project National Office.

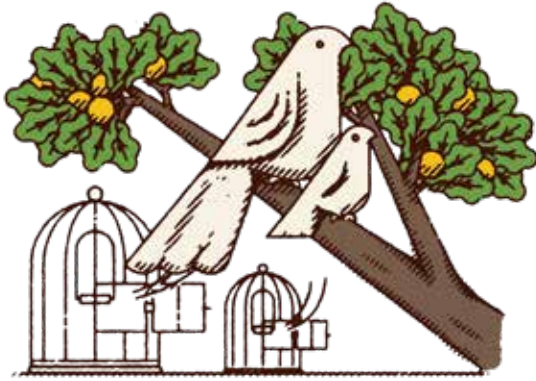
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COMMENTARY

BY SANDY OVALLE



A BRIEF SIGH OF RELIEF

Many Christians believe that immigration laws should be based on respect for the image of God, not racist attitudes.

In June, nearly 700,000 DACA recipients could breathe a sigh of relief when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against the Trump administration's decision to rescind the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. The court determined that the basis for President Trump's action was "arbitrary and capricious." The grounds presented for termination failed to consider the impact of the program's rescission, wrote Chief Justice John Roberts.

The grounds of the ruling are important because the court did not address whether DACA was legal. For now, DACA remains fragile. People who have benefited from the program, put in place by executive action under President Barack Obama in 2012, can continue to obtain valid work permits and are protected from deportation. And an estimated 130,000 people are now allowed to submit new applications for the program.

This momentary reprieve and upsurge of hope resulted from decades of fierce social, political, and legal organizing by undocumented youth and their supporters, often at great personal risk. The Trump administration may decide to attack DACA again. It would likely be a costly undertaking since a substantial bipartisan majority of Americans support DACA.

While DACA prevents the eviction from the U.S. of a sector of immigrants, it does not dismantle the massive deportation machine that operates in this country nor create a pathway to citizenship—key components of comprehensive immigration reform. Authentic immigration reform begins with the recognition that U.S. immigration laws, from their inception, have been informed by discriminatory narratives. The first immigration law, the Naturalization Act of 1790, made it possible for those born elsewhere to become citizens—but only if they were "free white persons" ("white" meaning certain Europeans, and "persons" essentially meaning men), excluding enslaved people, Native Americans, those without property, most

women, and all others not defined as white. Only property-owning white male citizens could vote.

Expansions and restrictions to citizenship and immigration in subsequent U.S. laws and policy have been informed by each moment's historical context and the dominant narratives in the country. Most often, the U.S. has had exclusionary immigration laws based on race, largely motivated by the racist sentiments of the time. The Trump administration's attempts to terminate DACA are no exception.

Christians understand that narratives give birth to laws. Scripture itself is evidence that laws are not formed in a vacuum but are interlaced with a narrative. As Bible scholar Sophia A. Magallanes-Tsang put it, history precedes ethics. We make laws *out of* an incarnate reality and *for* an incarnate reality. We cannot understand Hebrew law without understanding the Hebrew history that birthed it. We must consider the incarnate reality preceding laws when evaluating their meaning and validity.

What is the present U.S. incarnate reality? Our government separates children from their parents and cages them. Our laws punish immigrant families deemed to appear to need public benefits. Our laws ban humanitarian relief to Middle Easterners fleeing war. Our immigration laws still prioritize Europeans.

The Trump administration has fostered and weaponized anti-immigrant sentiments and devised policies to accompany racial hatred. But Trump is not alone. Obama was rightly termed "deporter-in-chief" and several presidential administrations before his failed to address the racist realities that have motivated much immigration policy.

Christians cannot stand on the side of policies that honor the image of God in some and annihilate it in others. Countering racist narratives from centers of power is crucial for the life of a democracy. Our votes make a difference by supporting anti-racist policies and those who would enact them.

In Justice Sonia Sotomayor's opinion on the DACA decision in June, she pointed to the "impermissible discriminatory animus" in President Trump's rhetoric that led to his action to rescind DACA. Sotomayor reveals the dangers of not considering the broader context in which laws are made. As long as racist narratives nurture a racist context, racist laws will be birthed. ✕

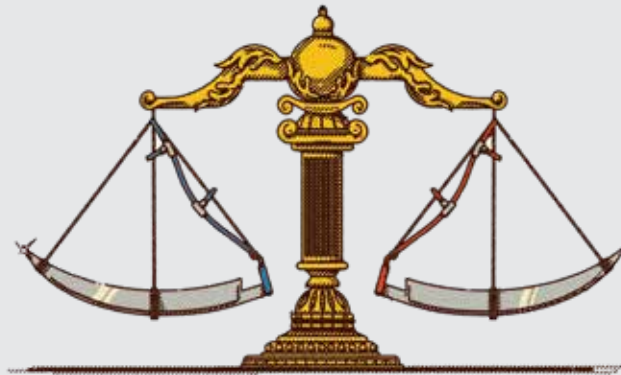
Sandy Ovalle is director of campaigns and mobilizing at Sojourners.

COMMENTARY

BY HEATHER BEAUDOIN

T

CONSERVATIVES TURN AGAINST CAPITAL PUNISHMENT



There is a nationwide trend of Republican state lawmakers rethinking the death penalty, and their faith is playing a central role. From Catholics to evangelicals, Christian lawmakers on the Right are abandoning capital punishment like never before.

Take Colorado as an example. For years a bill to repeal the death penalty ran into a wall in the state Senate. This year three Republican senators co-sponsored the bill and provided the crucial votes for it to pass. The Colorado House of Representatives approved it and the governor signed it into law in March—making Colorado the 22nd state to abolish the death penalty.

Why did they do it? These Republican lawmakers decided the death penalty does not align with their Christian or conservative values: the sanctity of human life, individual liberty, and limited government. They see a system that exonerates one person on death row for every nine it executes, with more than 160 people in the U.S. being freed from death row due to wrongful convictions since 1973. They see a bloated government program that does nothing to make people safer.

“We were created in the image of God and that is a very good thing. And part of what that means, in my understanding, is it is against the natural order for one created in the image of God to willfully take the life of another created in the image of God,” said state Sen. Owen Hill. “My conscience demands that I vote to abolish the death penalty in Colorado.”

The same story unfolded in New Hampshire in 2019. Forty percent of that state’s Senate Republican caucus voted to override their GOP governor’s veto of the death penalty repeal bill. Their actions ended capital punishment in the Granite State. “I’m a pro-life advocate, and that is a credo I’ve tried to live with my entire life,” said state

Sen. Bob Guida prior to voting. “We need to re-inculcate a consideration of the Almighty as the arbiter of life.”

A 2017 report from Conservatives Concerned About the Death Penalty shows the number of Republican state lawmakers sponsoring bills to repeal the death penalty increased sharply after 2012. From 2000 to 2012, it was rare for GOP state lawmakers to sponsor anti-death penalty bills, but in 2013 the annual number more than doubled. By 2016, 10 times as many Republicans sponsored repeal bills than in 2000, and more than 67 percent of the Republicans sponsoring death penalty repeal bills did so in red states.

Today, 34 states—more than two-thirds of the country—either do not have the death penalty or have not carried out an execution in at least a decade.

Despite this clear trend away from the death penalty at the state level, the Trump administration scheduled four executions for this summer after a 17-year hiatus in the federal use of capital punishment. (The first three were carried out in mid-July.) A diverse coalition of faith leaders responded by calling on the president and attorney general to halt their plan and focus instead on “protecting and preserving life.”

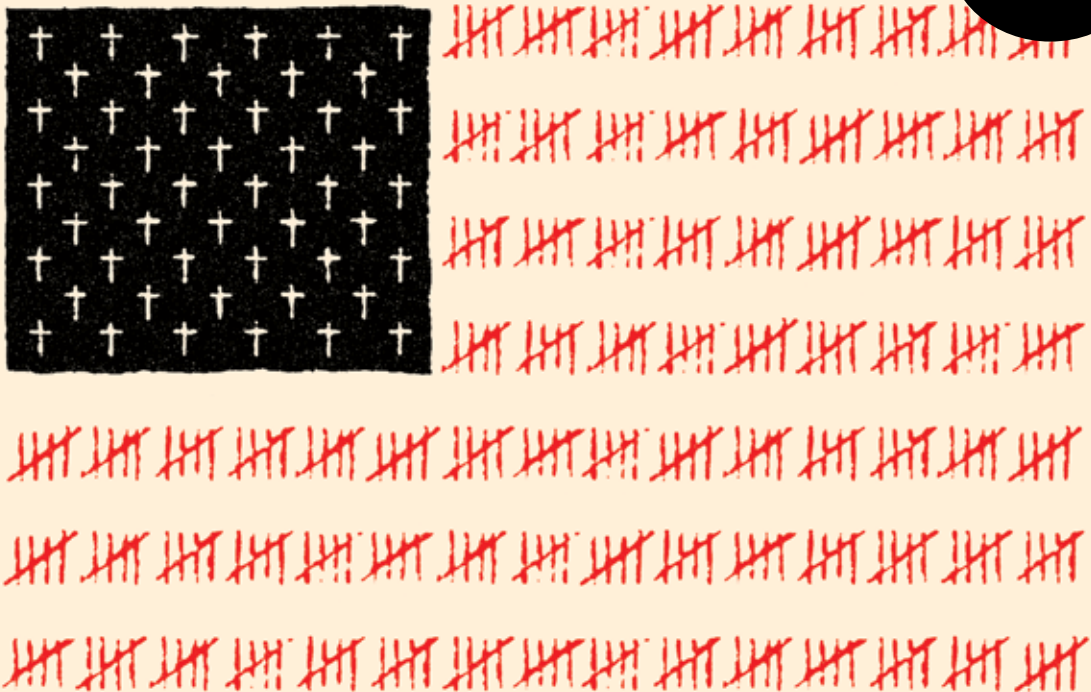
Federal officials would be wise to look at the growing ranks of conservative Republican state lawmakers who are abandoning the death penalty, and at the reasons why. They will find pragmatic politicians who are rejecting a failed system while also affirming their faith. ✦

**“THESE REPUBLICAN
LAWMAKERS
DECIDED THE DEATH
PENALTY DOES NOT
ALIGN WITH THEIR
CHRISTIAN OR
CONSERVATIVE
VALUES.”**

Heather Beaudoin is senior manager of the Equal Justice USA Evangelical Network and works with Conservatives Concerned About the Death Penalty.

DREAMING THE NEXT AMERICA

3



The darkest hour, as they say, comes one sliver of a moment before dawn. We have been experiencing our nation's darkest "day" since well before the moment the Confederacy fired its first shot at Fort Sumter in Charleston, S.C. That cannonball tore time in two, each successive battle of the Civil War ripping the sky farther and farther apart. After the war we saw stars, possibilities—the 13th and 14th and 15th Amendments to come.

Between May 28 and June 1 of this year, flames rose from numerous U.S. cities. One fire leveled a cinder-block structure that housed bathrooms and a maintenance office near the White House grounds. In the darkness we were forced to confront our hearts when tears filled our eyes as we watched a Starbucks burn, in the shadow of our numbed response when we first learned of George Floyd's death—another Black person dead. Yes, property damage is mournful. The destruction is a crime because of the impact the losses have on people. But no, this kind of property

**"THE RULE OF LAW WAS GASPING
FOR LIFE ON OUR CAPITAL
STREETS."**

damage is not “violent,” not in the manner of violence against people, which defaces the image of God, or against anything that holds the breath of God. Buildings are made by people, not by God. Nor do brick and mortar hold the breath of God. They do not feel. They do not have a family. Things can be replaced. Life cannot.

Police have killed more than 5,000 images of God since 2015, according to *The Washington Post's* Fatal Force database. Twenty-three percent of the dead are Black people—while Black people make up only 13 percent of the U.S. population. Each Black life ended represents a family gutted and potential descendants who won't come to be. On June 1, police shot tear gas and rubber bullets into a peaceful crowd of people protesting those killings so President Trump could pose for a photo-op in front of St. John's Episcopal Church, awkwardly holding a Bible.

That was it, one of our darkest moments. America's COVID-19 crisis combined with the protests to reveal the truth: Black lives do not and never have mattered in America. Because we had been silent for too long, democracy itself was face down on the blacktop outside of the White House. The rule of law was gasping for life on our capital streets.

Then ... dawn. Resolve rose across America. In the same way that Bosnians cried “Never again” after the mass graves of Srebrenica, Americans vow to never relive the ongoing horror of 2020.

We stand mere months away from Election Day. Now is the time to dream the next America, a nation where the economic, social, and political ladders of human hierarchy are burned to the ground, where we will join hands and ask an earnest question: How now shall we live? ❖

Lisa Sharon Harper is president of FreedomRoad.us and the author of several books, including the forthcoming *Fortune*, the story of her family and a call for reparations.

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HUNGRY SPIRIT

BY ROSE MARIE BERGER

GENERATIONS OF TRAUMA



H

How can someone born white take on new flesh when they are old?

This is the question I hear when I read the story of Nicodemus during this Black Lives Matter moment amid the 400-year-long freedom struggle of Black people in the U.S. “How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their

mother’s womb to be born!” (John 3:4). How?

In 1707, my sixth great-grandfather bought my sixth great-grandmother at a slave auction at a French military post in what is now Mobile, Ala. She, later “christened” Thérèse, was a 10-year-old Chitimacha girl. He, Jacques Guedon, was a 17-year-old from Nantes in Brittany who had been recruited into the French colonial navy.

The Chitimacha were the most powerful nation along the Gulf Coast. Prior to contact with Europeans, the Chitimacha lived in a sophisticated matrilineal culture of classes and clans that served them for more than 10,000 years—through disease, war, and climate changes. They vigorously and continually defended their homeland against incursions and slave raids by English, Spanish, and French military, migrants, and missionaries. Today, they are the only tribe in Louisiana to still occupy a portion of their aboriginal homeland.

But a young French-Canadian commander named Bienville was tasked with establishing a fort at Mobile and defending it against the English. He needed to make alliances with native nations—primarily the Chickasaw and Choctaw—or severely weaken those that refused. To accomplish these twin goals and build up his personal wealth by selling Indian slaves, Bienville led his regiment in a night raid on Thérèse’s village. Likely all the adults were massacred. The dozen or so children left alive, including Thérèse, were rounded up for sale. It was a minor skirmish in France’s half-hearted attempt to establish and maintain extractive trade routes for maximum profit and minimum outlay, an expedient conquest to boost political standing and pay off debts.

Guedon took the enslaved Thérèse to the military post in Natchitoches, La. The Spanish Catholic Church, influential in the region and with laws against enslaving Indigenous people, encouraged Guedon to “Christianize” his relationship with this young woman—with whom he had three daugh-

ters—and so he “married” her at the nearest Spanish fort. She was given a “Christian name,” Marie Anne Thérèse de la Grande Terre. My maternal ancestors lived in the Natchitoches region until the 1930s.

Why revisit this entangled and complicit family history? Veteran David Peters says, “If PTSD results from being the prey—re-experiencing the feeling that something is hunting you, hurting you, trying to kill you—then moral injury results from being the predator—where you have done things to hurt people.” We know trauma is passed down in families. Is moral injury also transferred from one generation to the next?

The story of Jacques and Thérèse illustrates how the two sides of the trauma coin live in a family. The predator “marries” the prey amid larger economic forces (and their political and military enforcers) and they bear children.

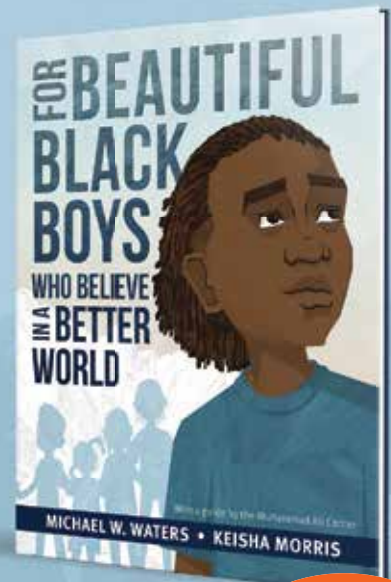
Colonial conquest was designed to win every time: sadistic violence that enlisted the services of theology to create an “other” for purposes of consolidating land and power. “First contact” in this branch of my family was cruel, carried out under cover of Catholic imperialism, and spawned wealth over generations as these French-Chitimacha ancestors became “white.” At the same time, France and Spain’s Catholic empires—always accompanied by zealous notetakers—kept the records of soldiering and commerce, trade and land acquisition, baptisms and burials that allow me entry into my past. This is how we examine the “dirty pain,” as therapists call it, of our past: the moral culpability of conquest, enslavement, and color lines, as well as the “clean pain” of native survivance, generative power, and a creole culture.

The intertwining of moral injury and trauma are destiny only if we let them be. Weaponized whiteness, while both hereditary and communicable, is not an idiopathic disease. For “white” folks, reentering the stories of our past can bring us to sources of unacknowledged injury to others and unhealed trauma in ourselves, which manifest now as white supremacy and systemic racism. *Not*, let me emphasize, for the purpose of “performative allyship” through a recitation of white woundedness. But instead for the purposes of being “born again,” both in flesh and in spirit (John 3:6). ♦

Rose Marie Berger, author of *Bending the Arch*, is senior editor of *Sojourners*.

New Picture Book Encourages Activism

Inspired by real-life events, *For Beautiful Black Boys Who Believe in a Better World* encourages hopeful forms of activism and advocacy in response to racism and gun violence. The book includes a discussion and activity guide, created by the Muhammad Ali Center, that explores racism, gun violence, and positive social change.



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EYEWITNESS

4



**"WE NEED TO GIVE
KIDS A BIT MORE
BENEFIT OF THE
DOUBT."**

SPACE TO SPEAK THEIR MINDS

"I teach music and theater, so it was a little difficult to teach via an online platform. I started an initiative called 'Worship Wednesdays,' and I took over our school's Instagram Live page. We started with vocal warmups and a song where the kids could move around—I choreographed the dances myself. Then I went through another two or three songs. We set it up so kids can request to appear on the screen with you, so I'd have some of them come and sing that way.

What I noticed is that students were seeking engagement with each other. The Instagram Live thing was cool because they got to interact. They couldn't see each other's faces but they could engage in a chat. Growing up is all about interacting with your peers, and so they had been missing out on that opportunity.

[Regarding the pandemic, police violence, and racism] We need to give kids a bit more benefit of the doubt because they're seeing these things and they have thoughts and feelings about them. What I want to be able to do is to offer practices that allow space for them to speak their minds. It shows them that their thoughts and feeling are valuable, but it also gives them the opportunity to learn from each other.

That's one of the great things about the arts: It's a way for students to relieve those feelings and emotions. You can sing a song when you don't have the words yourself.

I want to instill in my students a level of confidence to know that they are enough in themselves. We are made in the image and likeness of God, and when God looks at us, God says we are good." ❖

Vincent Hale is a fine arts educator at Our Lady Queen of Angels School in East Harlem. He spoke with *Sojourners* about students' response to the pandemic and the national reckoning with racism.



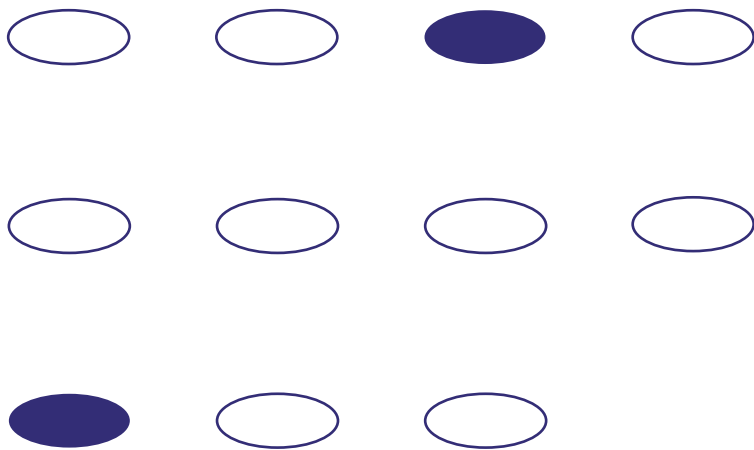
UNAFRAID TO HOPE

If we want discouraged people to vote, we need to talk about power—and outsmart the deliberate barriers placed in the way.

BY STACEY ABRAMS







I grew up in Gulfport, Miss., which is on the coast, and my parents are from Hattiesburg, which is about an hour north up Highway 49. On weekends, my mom and dad would pile the six of us in the car, and we would visit my grandparents.

My grandparents' names always caused some confusion in our family because my grandmother was Wilter and my grandfather was Walter, but they called each other Bill and Jim. I didn't know who was who. And my grandmother—Wilter, Bill, and known affectionately by my grandfather as Sugar Honey—she and my grandfather raised us with my parents to understand where we came from.

They wanted us to understand that my great-grandmother Moo Moo, who lived in the little house next to theirs, was two generations removed from slavery. Her grandparents had been slaves. Her parents had been sharecroppers. If you were lucky, you would get there in time to help her shell peas and listen to the stories that she would tell. You could listen to the history from her mouth, and you knew you were in a sacred place sitting on that front porch. When I got ready to run for office, I was bringing them with me, and I didn't quite understand it.

But in September 2018, as the election for Georgia's governor was heating up and stories were flying around about voter suppression, I went home to Mississippi because my grandmother was ailing. My grandfather had passed away in 2011, but my grandmother, she was on the edge. Grandma had a rocking chair recliner she sat in most of the day and a bed right beside it. When you came in the

room, you sat on the edge of the bed and took her hand—because she was watching MSNBC, and you didn't want to interrupt her learning why she was mad that day.

When she got to a place where she was going to acknowledge your presence, she would mute the television and turn to you. As I sat by her bedside, her hand was frailer than it had ever been before. The skin was papery and soft. The bones were brittle, and I could feel every one of them; I knew I was holding my grandmother's hand for one of the last times. But she didn't want to talk about how she was ailing; she wanted to talk about my election. She asked me if I was taking care of her baby, meaning me. I said, "Grandma, I'm doing my best. But I'm worried, because this man I'm running against is in charge of the election. He's the scorekeeper, he's the contestant, he's doing the box copy, he's the umpire, and it's going to be hard." And she said, "Have you done what you can?" I said, "Yes ma'am." "Let me tell you about the first time I voted," she said.

'BUT WE'VE WON'

My grandmother grew up in Mississippi, and she was a part of the civil rights movement in the way so many Black people were at that moment: not on the front lines, but quietly pushing. She and my grandfather had five children and they worked at the university; if they had been too visible in their protest, they might've lost their lives. They would've certainly lost their income.

But their children were more directly involved. My father was arrested at the age of 14 or 15 helping register Black people to vote in Mississippi. My mother did the same work—she just managed not to get caught. My grandmother talked about how she would have to pay bail to get her children out of jail. That was part of her contribution to the civil rights movement.

As we sat there, I was expecting her to tell me this great story about how proudly she went and cast her first ballot. But that's not what she said.

It was 1968—the first presidential election in which she would be eligible to vote—and my grandmother was in the back room of the three-room house she and my grandfather occupied. They'd gotten off work and they'd

gotten dressed, because you used to get dressed up to go and vote. My grandfather called out, "Bill, it's time to go." And my grandmother said nothing.

He yelled out, "Wilter, it's time to go."

She still didn't respond, so finally he came to the back and said, "Sugar Honey, what's going on? It's time for us to go and vote."

But my grandmother was sitting frozen on the bed. She said, "I don't want to go." He said, "What do you mean, you don't want to go? We get to vote in this presidential election. We get to vote!"

And she said, "I'm scared." She remembered the dogs and the hoses. She remembered the billy clubs.

"But we've won," said my grandfather. "The Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 passed. Mississippi finally acknowledged the federal government, and we get to go vote! Your children went to jail for this! Our friends and families, we fought for this. Why won't you come?"

And what she told me chilled me. She said, "I wasn't afraid of the right to vote—I was afraid of the power."

My grandfather took her hand and said, "Wilter, you need to come on."

My grandmother told me, "I didn't want to go, because I was afraid that if I got up and went out there, I might be disappointed. It might not work."

But she screwed her courage up anyway, because she thought about my dad, Robert. And she thought about her girls, Max and Val, and her younger boys, Jerry and Terry, and she said, "They worked too hard for me to refuse." So she got up and she went.

DESPAIR, NOT APATHY

My grandmother never missed another election, but what she told me stayed with me: She was afraid of her power.

So often we rail against folks for being apathetic; they're not apathetic—they are afraid. They have been despairing for so long. They have been desperate for so long. They are afraid of hope. They are afraid of faith. From the beginning of this country, we have been told that we are not enough. We've been told that our bodies count but not our souls. We've been told that we are insufficient for this moment, so why bother trying?

It is our responsibility to go to those people who are sad. They are beaten. They are working for wages that are too low for families that are broken. They are afraid that what they have is all they will ever see—and it could be taken away.

And if we want them to take their power, we've got to talk to them about power. No euphemisms about "you should vote because someone died"; you need to vote so we can *live*. That is our responsibility. That is our opportunity, and that is our obligation. That should be the message.

Voter suppression is no longer billy clubs and hoses and dogs. It's administrative rules. It's bureaucratic barriers. It's precincts that seem to close in the dead of night.

But they don't close secretly. They don't have the ability to take our votes simply because they can. They do it because we don't show up at the county board of elections meetings. We don't protest when they're taking our stuff; we get angry when we find out that it's gone. There are ways that we can see the traps *before* we get there.

FIFTY SETS OF RULES

Voter registration is a trap. We are one of the only industrialized, democratized nations that requires people to do the work themselves. In almost every other nation, you are automatically registered. Automatic registration isn't: "If you go and get your driver's license, then we give you your right to vote." Automatic registration is: "If you are born into this country eligible, we will make sure you have a voice." That is what we should have.

But because we live in a nation that has begun its path to democracy by putting stumbling blocks in our way, we've got to start moving those blocks. We have 50 different democracies in America, not one; the rules for getting registered are different in every state. It's your responsibility to know what those rules are. Every day in your churches and as your lay leaders go out into the community, take voter registration forms with you if it's legal. You've got to be able to register people to vote, because that's the point of entry for our power.

But they've figured out that we knew how to get on the rolls, so then they started purging us from those rolls.



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There are nine states where you can lose your right to vote simply because you didn't use it. When I don't go hunting on Saturday, no one tells me that I've lost my Second Amendment right, so why is it that I can lose my right to vote simply for not using it? And in dozens of other states, it can happen anyway without having it on the books—so don't think you're safe just because you're not in one of those nine states.

Every single week, when you do your sermons between now and November, you need to ask: "Have you checked your status? Are you on the rolls? Can you vote?" But that's just the beginning.

ABSENTEE VOTING WORKS

The second trap around voter suppression is, "Do you have access to the ballot?" That includes early voting in the states where it's allowed. Early voting was very effective in Florida in 2018, where 60,000 people used college early voting locations. In 2019, Florida passed a law saying you could not have an early voting location on a college campus unless it had adequate non-permitted parking. These restrictions—which were loosened in April 2020—would have required most of those colleges to build a new parking deck to give people the right to vote. In North Carolina, where early voting helped elect Barack Obama in 2008, early voting hours have gotten shorter and the number of voting days smaller and smaller since then.

Most states have some version of absentee balloting. Access to the ballot means being the church that says to your people, "I'm going to make sure all of you apply for absentee ballots. We're going to pass them out in the pews this week. You're going to fill them out."

In 2018, my gubernatorial campaign in Georgia sent out 1.6 million applications, and we received 53,000 more votes by absentee ballot than our opponent did. I'm here to tell you it works. That's why they're trying to restrict who gets to use absentee ballots.

EVERYONE'S SACRED RIGHT

Then there's voter ID. The issue with restrictive voter ID is they've taken the basic ID and made the restrictions finer and finer, so that few people can fit through, like a rich man getting through the eye of a needle. Requiring voter ID is not about, "Do we know who you are?" It's about, "Are you the 'right' person?"

Wisconsin restricted its voter ID requirements in 2015. There was an elderly Black woman who had been born in Missouri. She came of age during segregation and had voted in every election in Wisconsin since she moved there. In 2016, when she got ready to vote, they told her no; she had to have new paperwork. The problem was that the new paperwork in Wisconsin required that she have an *original* birth certificate. But if you were Black and born in Missouri during segregation, you were likely born at home, and you

didn't get a birth certificate. You got a certificate of live birth. But in Wisconsin that was insufficient, and they told this woman—who could point out her name in the 1930 census—that she did not exist for the purposes of voting in Wisconsin. They would not give her a license, and she did not get to vote in 2016.

These stories are told across the country. In places where restrictive voter ID is in place, people do not have the right to vote. We cannot simply bemoan this fact: If you live in a state with restrictive voter ID, do something about it. Ask your parishioners if they have what they need—and if they don't, help them get it. Take up a collection because these things aren't free; the ID may be free but getting a certificate may be \$75.

My parents raised me to believe the right to vote is sacred and that you work for it—and you work to make sure everyone has it. I decided to focus on voter suppression, so I started the work of Fair Fight. In the 2020 election we're going to be in the 18 battleground states making certain that the right to vote is protected. We want to help people do voter education. We want to help send people forward so that they can vote with confidence, because we have millions of nonvoters who do not vote—not because they can't, but because they're afraid. Together we can lift that fear.

But what I need you to understand is that we've already won. We won because we changed what people believed was possible. We won because people took their power and they showed up. Even though the election in Georgia was stolen, our responsibility is to not let their theft steal our spirit. This is our moment. We've already won; we just have to claim the victory. We can set our hands to it and change the future. ✱

Stacey Abrams, the Democratic nominee in Georgia's 2018 gubernatorial election, is the founder of Fair Fight, which works to fight voter suppression and promote fair elections. This article is adapted from a speech she gave in February 2020 at the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Clergy and Lay Leadership Conference.



Raising the Coronavirus Generation

How will our ongoing traumas affect
the way our kids see the world, God,
and faith?



By Sandi Villarreal
Illustrations by
Nick Blanchard



Each spring, I plan how to survive the summer. Without the school-year routine, our family leans on relatives, friends, summer camps, and cobbled-together vacation time to get our kids through. But this year, everything stopped: In a pandemic, you can't visit Grandma or drop off the toddler for a playdate. If raising children takes a village, our village has been scattered. And while the nation collectively experiences this ongoing trauma, parents are attempting to shepherd our children through the same.

A large part of parenting is risk assessment—a constant cost-benefit analysis of how the decisions you make will affect your children for the rest of their lives. When I was pregnant with my third child, now 1, I read Emily Oster's *Cribsheet: A Data-Driven Guide to Better, More Relaxed Parenting, from Birth to Preschool* to alleviate the added anx-

iety. Oster, an economics professor at Brown University, correctly observes that with constantly changing internet recommendations on everything from breastfeeding to screen time, "there is reassurance in seeing the numbers for yourself." She lays out the scientific data so parents can make informed decisions; for me, it offered confidence—and a rare sense of control.

But that sense of security goes out the window in a pandemic, unforeseen economic collapse, and necessary reordering of our institutional constants. Parents face new risks with precious little, and everchanging, data to guide our analysis. The most common fear shared by parents I've spoken to is that our kids *won't be OK*—that in trying to find the balance between naked truthfulness and parental protectionism, we'll lean too heavily to one side, that the wrong decisions will leave lasting marks that

follow them into adulthood.

"I don't know what the world is going to look like. Will I have the wisdom and the capacity and the ability to help guide her through?" Susi McCrea tells me. When we spoke, McCrea was 32 weeks pregnant and living in northeast Washington, D.C., with her husband, Christopher, who was recently laid off, and 1-year-old daughter Katja.

"Will we be able to help [Katja] build the resilience that she needs for something that's so full of uncertainty—and maybe just a really uncertain world for quite some time—without instilling a lot of fear?"

THOSE LEFT BEHIND

It's the question all parents—and educators, youth ministers, counselors, and other caregivers—are asking. Just as previous generations have been



defined by crises and technological breakthroughs, the coronavirus pandemic and the structures it toppled will affect the way this generation perceives the world, experiences security, relates to God, and understands their faith.

“One thing we do know from previous generations [is] these crises are foundational,” says Ruth Igielnik, senior researcher on the demographics and social change team at Pew Research. A crisis or trauma has a clear *before* and *after*. Lives are completely changed.

We also know the impacts of that change are not evenly distributed. “Don’t worry about teaching them,” went the refrain among many teachers and parents in the first month of our global homeschooling experiment. “No one is ahead or behind right now.” While comforting, it’s a false premise. Many children living in poverty and

in rural communities couldn’t access online curricula. Some children of essential workers also lost easy access to their parents, who sequestered themselves from their families. Black children saw a disproportionate number of their loved ones test positive and die from the coronavirus *and* continue to live the daily trauma of police violence that targets people who look like them. And millions of children are experiencing the upheaval of one or both parents without jobs, as unemployment surged to 14.7 percent in April, the highest level since the Great Depression.

Of course, the data that would begin to paint a picture of how these manifold crises impact generational behavior doesn’t exist yet; researchers have yet to define our newest generation. In determining 1996 as the cutoff year between Millennials and their Gen Z successors, Pew considered that Millennials

can remember a before and after 9/11, explains Igielnik—for example, a time before TSA, airport screenings, “enhanced border security,” and unending extensions of the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force—while for Gen Z, these have always been the norm.

Likewise, “Gen Z will know a world before and after the pandemic and the financial crisis,” Igielnik says. Our younger kids, those born after 2014 or so, will not.

DOING CHURCH

This means that young kids might not see anything unusual in experiencing church as a Sunday morning livestream—a reality that could catalyze our efforts to reimagine what we call “church.”

“The first week we did Communion, all I had in my house were Cheerios and



Young kids might not see anything unusual in experiencing church as a Sunday morning livestream.



cranberry juice,” Almeda Wright tells me. Wright is an associate professor of religious education at Yale Divinity School who focuses in part on adolescent spiritual development. She’s also mom to an 18-month-old. Wright says members of her current worshipping community would likely look askance if they saw her daughter fiddling with the elements. But at home, they can experience Communion together in a casual, even playful way. “I wonder if, going forward, there will be less of the kind of hands-off, ‘this is only for adults’ that some traditions have around the major liturgical traditions of the congregation,” Wright says.

Conversations about what makes a virtual religious gathering valid have been and will continue to be debated—just type “virtual Communion” into Twitter’s search bar. And the ways our churches are forced to adapt will have an impact on how kids who choose to stay in the church approach those questions. As Alison Lytton Yeung, a mom of a 22-month-old and 1-month-old twins in Hoboken, N.J., puts it: “How do we maintain faith as something that we do in community when we are not doing anything in community?” She’s not sure when the family will feel comfortable returning to Sunday school or other church activities.

“We’ve been having to wrestle with what the role of the faith community is and will be going forward,” Wright says, pointing to the dramatic decline of church membership over the past couple of generations. “The pandemic is kind of hastening us to have that conversation.”

Dante Stewart, a writer, seminarian, and father to 2-year-old Asa, says compounding crises have forced the church to look beyond membership models and ask how it’s really serving people. “Our first question to ask is: How are image-bearers feeling unloved and how can we partner with them to make them feel loved?” Stewart says. The pandemic has highlighted relational, economic, racial, and spiritual crises, and the church must respond. “For me, Christians showing up in this moment means that we figure out how to create a more loving and just world, and wherever people feel unloved”—personally, socially, religiously, economically, politically—“we do whatever we can to create a more loving and just society.”

At the height of a nationwide uprising in the wake of the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, and so many more Black people at the hands of police,

faith communities became way stations for people protesting police brutality. In late May, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in South Minneapolis quickly transformed its closed sanctuary into a medic station for protesters wounded with tear gas or rubber bullets. In Washington, D.C., where churches and temples line 16th Street N.W. all the way from the Maryland border to the White House, faith communities have met protesters with masks, water, hand sanitizer, and even meals. Volunteers were using the patio of St. John’s Episcopal Church to serve protesters when militarized police cleared the park with tear gas ahead of Trump’s infamous photo-op.

Many of these churches and denominations are not new to this type of on-the-ground ministry—but their newfound visibility gives parents something tangible, a physical space to bring their children, clad in masks and toting homemade signs. “Honestly, maybe it’s an opportunity for some more powerful experiences, especially for older kids, being able to see in a more active way the practical outplay of people being Jesus’ hands and feet,” McCrea says.

OUR COLLECTIVE WORK

Some have begun to prognosticate on what norms will define “the COVID generation”—online school or church, more common digital relationships, technology that will render everyday transactional touch unnecessary, the death of the open workspace (thanks be to God). But Abby Wong-Heffter, a child and family therapist focused on trauma and assistant instructor at the Seattle School of Theology and Psychology, isn’t so sure.

Wong-Heffter points to the return to community after the 1918 influenza and more recent Ebola outbreaks, and predicts: “We come out on the other side and we’re so much more inclined toward connection and toward physical relationship with each other.” That connection, in community, could be what helps us heal. “When there’s a collective trauma, the response also has to be communal,” says Wong-Heffter. “So much of a way that we go about healing is individual, but with a collective experience, we usually need some way to come together in a large group for that healing to happen.” Schools, neighborhood associations, churches—these



could be the places where we gather to mourn what we lost, but also to reimagine what comes next.

Stewart says the church can lean into the charism of Jesus as healer to begin that process in a holistic way—focusing on spiritual and structural healing—and that young people should be part of that healing process. “Often times, we talk about young people rather than allowing young people to talk about themselves,” Stewart, who previously taught middle schoolers, says. “To connect with young people, you have to give space for them to shape a world for themselves and be someone who comes alongside, using whatever tools that you can to encourage them.”

Having honest, age-appropriate conversations with children about what’s happening around them is also important for their development through crisis. They’re inundated with messages, particularly in a season of heightened screen time, about coronavirus spikes, police brutality, election fearmongering, and more.

“If we learned nothing else from 9/11, watching the planes go into the towers over and over and over again did something to our mental health,” Wright says. “It’s the same thing with a lot of the videos of police brutality and the most recent murder of George Floyd.”

Along with conversation and offering opportunities to engage—even if just hanging a hand-drawn rainbow in the window for passersby or decorating a “Black Lives Matter” sign—Wright says spiritual formation—engaging in sensory prayer, prayer walks, family Bible studies—can help families find balance in ways that perhaps weren’t possible amid our pre-COVID packed schedules. “I think one of the things that [this generation] is learning through this pandemic, and we’ll probably learn through the rest of 2020, is the gift of adaptability,” Wright says. “And I think that applies to their social lives and their emotional health, but also to their spiritual well-being.”

THE AFTER

In early June, a friend and I arranged for our daughters, both age 6, to have a “socially distanced playdate.” Their facemasks quickly fell off as they bounded around the yard, digging in dirt and making a castle out of sticks,



pinecones, and daffodils. It was painful to watch them forget and then repeatedly remember the directive to “keep distance!” after months of only FaceTiming. My friend and I discussed school reopening, debated the safety of taking the kids with us to the protests near the White House, and tried to forecast how long we—the collective we—could keep doing things this way.

In *We Live for the We: The Political Power of Black Motherhood*, journalist Dani McClain wonders whether her young daughter will see society “collectively pull ourselves back from the brink of extinction and bring about a renaissance, a social reordering that benefits more of us” or find herself in “a postapocalyptic landscape similar to something out of an Octavia Butler novel.” And either way, asks McClain, “How will I explain the choices I’ve made as an individual, the choices made by the communities we belong to, the choices made by the governments and corporations that have influence over our lives?”

McClain wrote this in 2019, but parents today know the feeling: How will we explain our choices and those of our leaders in this time?

For now, we’re readying ourselves for the long run: from preparing children for a drastically altered school year, to making plans for socially distanced family holidays, to having difficult and age-appropriate conversations about our country’s racist institutions as monuments to our failures come toppling down. There’s little time for existential dread. But we’re also eagerly awaiting the after—not necessarily for a return to normal, but for a season of healing and settling into, and helping shape, what this new reality is for ourselves and our children. ✱

Sandi Villarreal is executive editor at Sojourners.

BORN IN HERESY

W

“White Christianity in America was born in heresy.”

This statement was made by Yale University theologian Eboni Marshall Turman last year before a large gathering of religion scholars. Marshall Turman, a formidable leader in African American theology, did not explain her meaning. In that room, she did not need to do so.

But as I heard her, I thought dolefully about how very long it took me as a white American Christian ethicist to be ready to engage or even to understand such a statement. I wondered doubtfully how many white American Christians today would be prepared to discuss it rationally. After all, part of what is so deeply wrong with white evangelicalism has to do with race. If what comes “after evangelicalism” does not address our racism at its roots, we shouldn’t bother.

To say that white Christianity in America was born in heresy is to make a theological statement about racism prior to any moral evaluation. It is to suggest that our local racism problem is ultimately rooted in heresy, a violation of central tenets of Christian doctrine. It is also to say that this heresy was present from the birth of American Christianity. There was no original innocence—the heresy and its re-

sulting sins were there from the beginning.

This begs the question of whether the ultimate historical source of such heresy can be identified. It seems to me that a compelling starting point is 15th century Europe as it began conquering and colonizing the world in the name of Christ. The story begins with those first imperial powers, Spain and Portugal, but soon after extends to Britain and other European colonial nations, including Holland, France, Belgium, and so on. These were empire-building nations on the cusp of their grand adventures. They confidently believed themselves to be the center of the world, superior to all other cultures, entitled to conquer and colonize, and in doing so actively advancing God’s will. The European powers believed this for many centuries. Some would say that they, and their descendants, believe it still.

These European conquerors, and the church officials who blessed and authorized them, had 1,400 years in which to learn key elements of Christian theology that might have affected their plans. Three of the most relevant include the doctrine that all humans are made in the image of God and thus of equal worth to God (Genesis 1:26-27), the doctrine that all human beings are kin as all are descendants from Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:4-25, 3:20), and the doctrine that God is the author of moral law, which includes universal bans on murder, adultery, theft, and covetousness (Exodus 20:1-17).

But the European imperial powers decided to believe heresies instead. They believed in the unequal worth and value of, and in ontological differences between, persons based on their “race” and “color,” and they came to believe that God’s moral law against murder, adultery, theft, and covetousness did not apply in the relation between European



SY

THE ROOTS OF WHITE SUPREMACIST CHRISTIANITY BEGAN IN THE EMPIRE-BUILDING NATIONS OF THE COLONIAL AGE.

By DAVID P. GUSHEE



conquerors and those they conquered.

Christian faith taught that people should be humble, aware of their mortality, sinfulness, and dependence on God. But the European conquerors instead succumbed to the deadly sin of pride. They were the best people on earth, the most advanced, the agents of civilization, the bearers of faith. Their church told them that they had the right and duty to conquer, colonize, extract, and even enslave entire non-European populations. As Willie Jennings has put it, these Europeans developed a “diseased social imagination.” It infected the entire world.

Christian faith should have served as a brake both on this pride and the wicked behaviors that it spawned. But Christianity had long since been fatally compromised by nationalism and proximity to political power. Rather than speaking with the prophetic voice of an Isaiah, or Jesus, European Christianity became a cheerleader for colonial conquest and enslavement, in the name of Jesus.

One could possibly imagine an imperialist, conquering, enslaving world power that is not also racist. But I cannot recall having ever read about one. Certainly, the 15th century European imperial mind racialized and colorized its prideful vision. It wasn't just that colonial Europeans were better because they were Christian, more technologically advanced, and militarily superior. They were also better because they were persons of the “race” and “color” called “white,” by contrast with lesser persons of other colors and races. The terms get scare quotes because they are all social constructions. But their effects are real enough.

There were many pivotal moments in the racializing and colorizing of the European Christian mind. Certainly, the direct encounter between light-skinned Europeans and darker-skinned peoples whom they conquered and enslaved played a significant role. *We* were white and Christian and European and better; *they* were “red” and “brown” and “black,” and heathen and native and worse. We were normal humans, or peak humans, and they were less-than-that humans. We were entitled to rule. They were slated to suffer, serve, and die. All of this with God's supervision and blessing.

The single best term to describe this kind of vision is white supremacy. Whiteness confers supremacy. And that, even a child in Sunday school ought to be able to tell you, is nothing but heresy. Yet it came to dominate the European and colonial mind.

AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF REJECTION

I do suspect that theologian J. Kameron Carter is right that the ultimate origin of a racialized European Christian mind is traceable to historic Christian anti-Judaism. Born from biblical Judaism, born as a messianic-apocalyptic Jewish movement, in its childhood a diaspora Jewish-Gentile Christian movement, the church gradually became a largely Gentile community that structured theological anti-Judaism into its teachings. All it took was for this theology of rejection to become an anthropology of rejection based on “race” or even “blood.” Once having learned how to classify and reject a people based on race and blood, the paradigm was available for other uses.

The racializing of Christian anti-Judaism occurred in mid-15th century Spain. Jews that had been forcibly converted to Catholicism beginning in the late 14th century (called *conversos*), and their descendants, were sometimes suspected of still secretly practicing Judaism and not being true Catholics. Eventually the nobility decided that *limpieza de sangre*, “cleanliness of blood” or “blood purity,” should become employed as a status marker to delineate between the so-called “Old Christians” and “New Christians” such as these. This was a way to discriminate using a blood purity test even if true religious sentiments could not be divined. This racializing of anti-Judaism (also employed against Muslims in Spain) was a fateful move that ever after was available for deployment.

The bottom line is that over many centuries white Europeans and their colonial offspring developed what theologian Reggie Williams calls a *racialized humanity*, and inevitably a *racialized divinity* as well. In technical terms, both theological anthropology and Christology were compromised by heresy.

Despite the biblical texts to the contrary, humanity was now viewed not as one, but as many. Human diversity is real. But a human racial hierarchy is fictional, indeed, heretical. That is what white Europeans built: a perverted anthropology in which white people occupy the peak of the hierarchy, the highest in goodness and value. Then down it goes from there. The darker the body of the person, the lesser the value. Black bodies, especially, became associated with sin, pollution, and degradation. Racism specifically as anti-Blackness got written into Christian theology and practice.

God, and Jesus, became white too. God's

whiteness was seen not just in art, though white God/Jesus was common in stained glass and painting. Jesus, as the best and highest of human beings, became a white man in the white imagination. This was white racist Europe making a god in our own image. In biblical terms, when people create gods in their own image that is called idolatry. Jesus as white, as our white guy, our white Savior, our white God—this became taken for granted. You might not notice it until someone challenged it with a different image.

THE DEFORMATION OF CHRISTIANITY

The Portuguese began enslaving Africans in the mid-15th century. More than 150 years later, the 20 or so Africans who arrived in the new Jamestown settlement were treated as indentured servants, as were some white Europeans. But over the succeeding decades, only African servitude became chattel slavery, with slave status inheritable. This development is highly significant, because it showed that anti-Black racism was required to institutionalize a mass system of chattel slavery. Somehow, white bodies could not be enslaved en masse and forever, but Black bodies could be. White supremacist heresy began to bear its sinful fruit on our soil.

Most human beings need to believe that what they are doing is morally justifiable. I think this very much helps to account for what developed in slaveholding America. White European racism before 1619 was sufficiently strong to help people justify the beginnings of African slavery. But the growing practice of African slavery here after 1619, with all its intrinsic and visible moral wrongs, required an intensification of white racism. It also required an intentional deformation of other aspects of Christian belief and practice so that Christian people could accommodate themselves to slavery. Christianity would need to be made amenable to building a state on the backs of Black slaves.

There were plenty of motivations to maintain slavery. The economy of an entire region gradually depended upon it. The most powerful people in the South built their lives, prosperity, families, and culture upon slavery. Financial interests well outside the South also benefited from the profits derived from slavery. Slavery was wired into the arrangements concluded in Philadelphia in 1776 and then in the Constitution in 1789. The shape of American politics from the beginning was affected by slavery.

THERE WAS NO ORIGINAL INNOCENCE — THE HERESY OF RACISM AND ITS RESULTING SINS WERE THERE FROM THE BEGINNING.

But we still had a choice. Despite it all, we could have followed the British lead and abolished slavery. Instead, we deepened our excuses, weakened our ethics, and denied biblical theology.

From the very beginning, there were already voices proclaiming that slavery was sin—including but not limited to Black people who protested it. Honor goes to those like the Quakers who opposed slavery quite early. Somewhere deep inside themselves, many white Americans, including direct participants in the slave system, knew that what they were doing was sin. But they went on doing it.

A SLAVEHOLDING EMPIRE RUN BY CHRISTIANS

In Romans 1:18-32, Paul attempts to account for the moral chaos and degradation of humanity. His argument begins with the claim that all human beings have plenty of access to knowledge about God and morality because God has plainly revealed it. But “ungodliness and wickedness” flourish when people “in their wickedness suppress the truth” (Romans 1:18). Paul is saying that people actively suppress the truth “in their

wickedness”—as an expression of their wickedness, and to enable further wickedness.

Paul argues that, as a result, “God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness” (Romans 1:28-29a). The suggestion is that God sometimes punishes people by allowing them to spiral downward, reap what they sow, and sink into ever greater debasement. The result is “every kind of wickedness,” including “covetousness, malice ... murder, strife, deceit, craftiness ... [and] slander”; as a way of life in which people feel free to be “insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil ... foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (Romans 1:29-31).

Paul could almost be describing a way of life in which, coveting ever-greater wealth and filled with pride in their own superior value, people set up a heartless, ruthless slave system in which they are free to covet, buy, sell, rape, steal, enslave, abuse, slander, deceive, and murder people—i.e., a slave state.

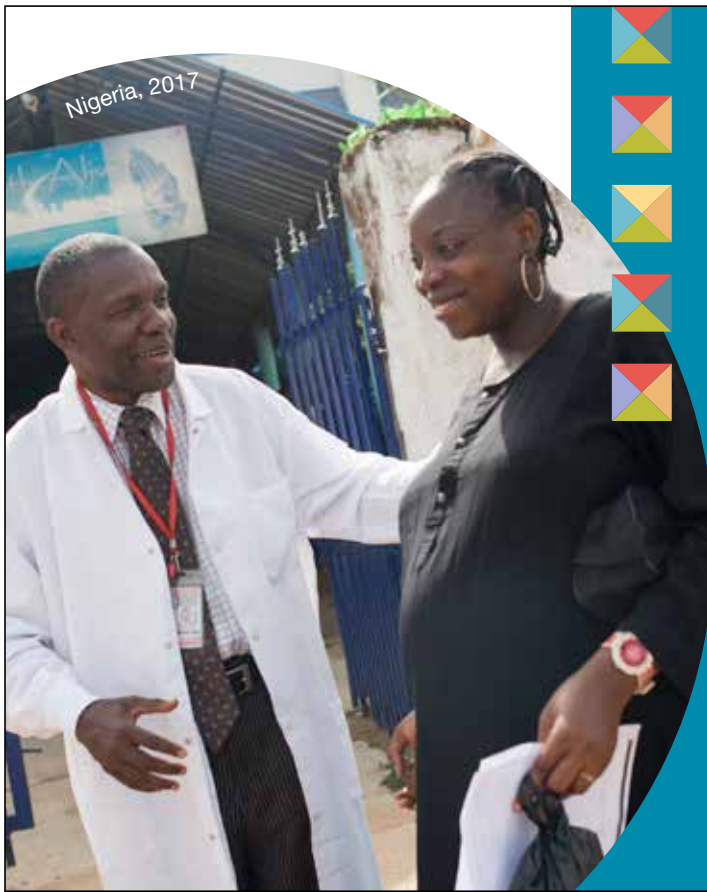
That similarity may not be coincidental. Paul was writing to Christian communities in Rome. Let us not forget that Rome was the capital of a massive slaveholding empire. Rome’s new Christians included

many slaves and former slaves, who knew all too well the degradations of slavery.

The difference is that the Roman slaveholding empire was pagan. The colonial and Southern U.S. slaveholding empire was largely run by Christians. The first who made me see a connection between European colonialism and Romans 1:18-32 was the Spanish colonial cleric Bartolomé de Las Casas, who made the point explicitly in describing the horrors he witnessed. He saw firsthand that expression of absolute power over others, that spiral downward into ever crueler forms of torture and ever more wicked forms of evil.

So it was that the moral degradation sunk in deeply and spiraled fiercely, all while white slaveholding Christians found a way to live with themselves. This begins to communicate why Turman could say that white American Christianity was born in heresy. ♦

David P. Gushee, a *Sojourners* contributing editor, is Distinguished University Professor of Christian Ethics at Mercer University in Atlanta. This article is adapted with permission from *After Evangelicalism: The Path to a New Christianity* (Westminster John Knox, August 2020).



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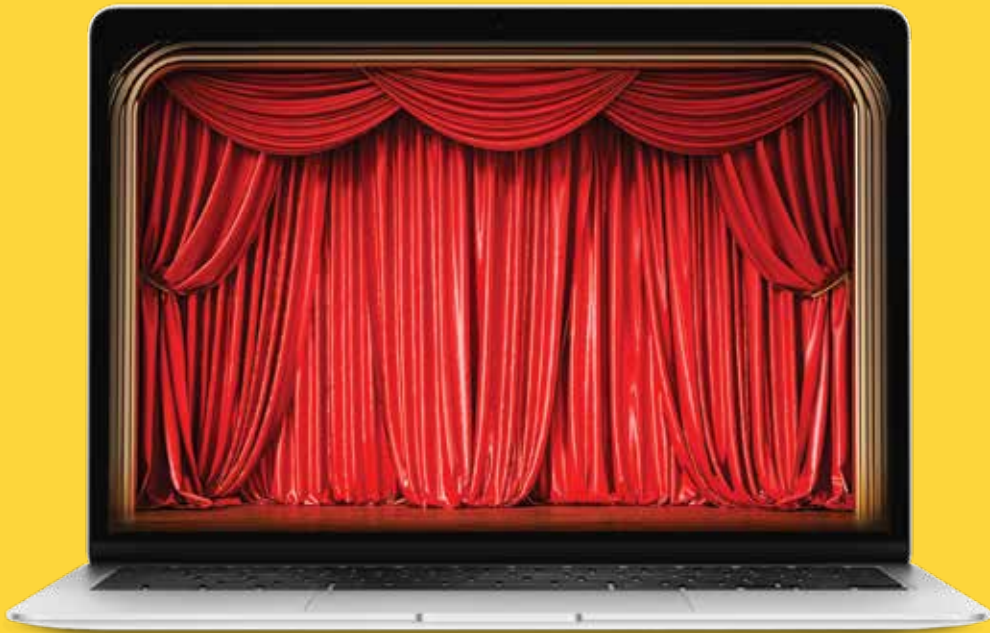
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SOJOURNERS

AMERICAN THEATER ISN'T DEAD. IN FACT, THE POSSIBILITIES ARE GOLDEN.



W

When Western theater was born in the ancient Theatre of Dionysus some 2,500 years ago, its creators aspired to create a democratic institution, meant to serve the members of

Theater

every tribe in Greece. The reality fell far short of the aspiration, of course, since women and slaves were excluded from both democracy and the grand stone auditorium. Nevertheless, the theater of Greece was born in a kind of

perfect storm, a concurrence of democratic ideology and ideals—especially the belief in free speech for those deemed fit to govern (i.e., free men)—with a golden age of literature. This era brought about some of the most powerful dramatic works known to humanity in the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes.

We could be at the brink of another golden age for theater, arising from changes caused by the coronavirus pandemic. How can I say this, when most of those who work in the



theater are worried about how theatrical institutions will survive this crisis? Joseph Haj, artistic director of the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, notes that theater has endured for centuries “because it is one of society’s proven necessities, not some old-fashioned practice.” It’s a necessity because humans need to gather to hear our stories and find safety in being together—the communal theater experience pushes back at the dangers and sadness that surround us.

And yet the questions abound: Will there be enough funding, public and private, to keep theaters afloat? Will audiences come if they are living in fear? Funding and sufficient audience support were worries before the pandemic hit, even as theatrical writing and technique thrived during the past decade, releasing many new voices onto public stages. The problem is that when a theater ticket often costs upward of \$100, few people can afford access to these new voices. Despite the democratic ideals at its roots, U.S. live theater has served a very small, mostly white, upper-middle-class audience. The main exceptions are the rare state and federal grants that provide broader access through educational programs.

But since the pandemic has emptied theaters, some important lessons are being learned about audiences and access. Across the U.S. and around the globe, from the National Theatre in London to Chicago’s Goodman Theatre, from the Metropolitan Opera to Los Angeles Theatre Works—and, of course, in the phenomenon that is *Hamilton*—theater has become accessible to anyone with adequate internet access, which of course still excludes millions. Through streaming, the potential audience for theater is expanded around the world.

It’s true that encountering theater through a screen doesn’t produce the same camaraderie and societal discourse as being physically present at a live event, where it’s been proven that our hearts begin beating in unison as we experience the dramatic arc of a story together. However, having some of the transformative power of drama and other performing arts available to more people virtually is still hopeful, and far better than no access at all.

Several playwrights echo this hope. “I think we are hungry for connection,” says renowned playwright and librettist Deborah Brevoort. “We need works that provide

meaning and uplift. That’s what music, concerts, and online performances are giving us now. And we need this same level of access to continue after the pandemic is over.” During the Works Progress Administration of the 1930s, the Federal Theatre Project gave away tens of thousands of free tickets to the American public to keep the theater alive and well. Theaters, government arts programs, and other arts funders could explore how to adapt this model to our own time and technology.

In some ways this moment has had an equalizing effect on how people perceive and participate in the arts. “The exciting thing is, when everyone was sheltering in place, people got creative immediately; they had online talks and online stuff,” says New York-based playwright Arlene Hutton, who is also a recent coronavirus survivor. “Everyone is amateur now, even celebrities—on Zoom or Facebook, we all look amateur and we’re all having the same technical problems.” How can we enable more people at all levels of experience to come together—virtually, or post-pandemic, physically—to create and perform in the future? In assessing this we can’t ignore how too few people have access to arts education and other opportunities to learn to make stories together. Thriving arts programs in all schools would help build a stronger society.

Playwright Crystal Skillman sees the current crisis “as a moment of challenge, a moment that is teaching us how to be better artists and make a better world.” As more people experience great theater online and listen together to stories, they are learning that—now more than ever—sharing stories and performance is vital to humanity. People are hungry for places to laugh and cry together, to sing and dance together, places where our vulnerabilities are revealed on the stage, just as they were 2,500 years ago when theater in the West was born.

Live theater has, without a doubt, suffered in this pandemic. But the current crisis may also be the opening needed to bring more democracy to the U.S. stage and audience. ✨

**OUR HEARTS
BEGIN TO BEAT
IN UNISON AS
WE EXPERIENCE
A STORY’S
DRAMATIC ARC.**

Stephanie Sandberg is an assistant professor of theater and film studies at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Va.



On Screen

From
*Brooklyn
Nine-Nine*

New & Noteworthy

BY THIS WE KNOW

The Chicago-based rap duo Verbal Kwest explore the Bible's commandments of love in their latest release, *Lovkwest*. On seven tracks, pastor-rappers J.Kwest (Julian De-Shazier) and BreevEazie (Anthony Lowery) unleash words of wisdom and passion over intricate beats, speaking of God's great embrace in a year of immense loss.

Verbal Kwest



The Longitudes

"The history of Christianity is one of cultural appropriation," Phuc Luu says in his debut *Jesus of the East: Reclaiming the Gospel for the Wounded*. Drawing on traditions of the Eastern church, Luu dislodges the West's dominance over much of Christianity, highlighting how the faith doesn't belong solely to Europeans.

Herald Press



Hear Our Prayer

Often shut out of religious institutions, Black trans, nonbinary, and intersex people of faith are provided space in *The Black Trans Prayer Book*. Edited by poet J Mase III and writer-performer Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi, this set of prayers, poetry, and more pushes back against transphobia and white supremacy.

The Black Trans Prayer Book

COP PROPAGANDA

By Chris Karnadi



In the first season of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, the show's main protagonist, Jake Peralta (Andy Samberg), arrests a jewel thief named Dustin Whitman (Kid Cudi) without sufficient evidence, and the entire precinct spends the next 48 hours trying to fix his mistake. By showing the police detectives desperately trying to find evidence,

Brooklyn Nine-Nine portrays the arrest as a puzzle to be solved instead of an abuse of power.

With likable characters and sharp writing that hits more than it misses, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* has cemented itself as both a critic and crowd favorite, earning Emmy nominations and massive support from its networks, NBC and Fox. Its cast is one of the more diverse on television, and so are its characters. The police captain is a gay, Black, married man. Two of the other detectives are Latinx; one of them is a bisexual woman.

But at the end of the day, the show sanitizes police brutality and misconduct with humor. Police incompetence in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* is portrayed as funny and showing a need for the character to develop; it doesn't threaten someone's safety like it does every day in real life.

In an article for *Vulture*, Kathryn VanArendonk argues that TV loves the police and centers them over and over. Crime procedurals, even one as popular and seemingly positive as *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, typically center the narrative of law enforcement and delineate the communities they "serve" as mere background for the actions of the main characters. Crime shows are propaganda for the

police, telling the American psyche that we need cops to maintain order.

But the order that police defend is white supremacy. The history of police in the South goes back to slave patrols who caught and returned escaped slaves to their owners; in the North police were first formed to crush labor strikes. The cops are no friends to minorities, especially Black and brown communities. *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* opts to paper over the history of policing rooted in slave patrols with quips and cold opens, and it's not funny.

I'm not Black but I have been threatened, followed, and harassed by law enforcement. I still feel their firm hands on my arms and back and the lasting paranoia of constantly feeling watched. If you've had similar experiences or experienced something much worse, you know that cops are no laughing matter.

I'm never going to watch *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* again. We have choices in our media consumption, and we should reject anything that portrays American policing as nonviolent or benign.

Chris Karnadi is an assistant editor of Duke Divinity's Faith and Leadership.

POORER THAN OUR PARENTS?

By
Danny Duncan
Collum



Eyes & Ears

OK, I admit it. I haven't read Thomas Piketty's 700-page *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, the most talked about economics book of recent decades. There are too many novels

in the world, and economics is hard. But not to worry, even for numerophobes like me, documentary filmmaker Justin Pemberton has come to the rescue with a quick and clever 103-minute movie of the same name that lots of people who claim to have read Piketty's book say is, if a not a sufficient replacement, at least an effective companion.

Despite the title, the bulk of the film covers the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries: A rotating cast of talking heads (including Piketty's own) narrate the story of wealth in Europe and North America—from the palace of Versailles ("Royals" by Lorde on the soundtrack) to the slave markets of New Orleans and the happy suburbs of mid-20th century America. All this is illustrated by a montage of clips from movies, including *Les Misérables* (the old black-and-white version and the musical), *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and many more,

TURNING THINGS AROUND WILL REQUIRE A POLITICAL REVOLUTION.

and Depression-era newsreel footage of striking workers battling police and seizing factories.

What we learn is that when capital existed almost entirely in the form of land, life was miserable for almost everyone and the top 1 percent owned almost everything, but the growth of their wealth was slow. With the Industrial Revolution, capital took the form of machines, the potential for growth was virtually infinite, and life was miserable for almost everyone. Along the way, we are told, the owning class developed ideas and marketing strategies that effectively controlled the way we think, so we didn't complain so much.

Finally we arrive in our current century, in which capital exists mostly in the form of financial abstractions (derivatives, futures, etc.), the top 1 percent own almost everything, and life is, if not always entirely miserable for everyone else, certainly pretty hopeless. Two-thirds of us, we learn, should expect to be poorer than our parents.

However, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* doesn't leave us hopeless. Piketty says that we can start turning things around simply by implementing serious taxes on accumulated wealth, accompanied by international cooperation to end the use of tax havens. According to him and other economists interviewed in the film, the right tax rate will punish the amassing of unproductive wealth, while still allowing profit from productive investment.

Of course, actually enacting such policies will require a political revolution, but as the New Deal sequence of the film shows, it has happened before. ♦

Danny Duncan Collum teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort. He is the author of the novel *White Boy*



**"PERHAPS THIS IS WHY I WAS
FASCINATED BY JESUS' DEATH:
I SAW THE EXPERIENCE OF MY
OWN PEOPLE REFLECTED IN IT."**

She observes, "Perhaps this is why I was fascinated by Jesus' death: I saw the experience of my own people reflected in it." In another chapter, Kegler recounts the pain of attending a church youth group for two years, with the leadership ultimately asking her to "pray the sinner's prayer" when she revealed her sexual orientation.

Despite repeatedly encountering homophobia in church communities, Kegler persists in her attempts to have a relationship with God and a church family. She finds her way to St. Olaf College's campus chapel; attends seminary, where she wrestles with the paradoxes in the Bible; and becomes an ordained Evangelical Lutheran Church of America minister serving in Minnesota.

Kegler brings her theologian's hat to the book as well, insisting that readers see the queer community as made in God's image. She addresses "clobber passages," examines Paul's motives in conversing with the early church about Christ's death and resurrection, and

ponders the definition of "sin." She indicts the U.S. church for aligning itself too often with empire rather than with Christ.

Although Kegler sometimes harbors ill will toward those who oppress her, she does not place them in eternal damnation but at a never-ending banquet table with a God who resides outside time and space. "I have accepted being called to serve as a minister in a religion full of people who daily deny my humanity, my goodness, and the worthiness of my love, my vows, and my family," she writes. "Dare to be found." ✕

Wendy Besel Hahn (wendy-beselhahn.com) lives in Reston, Va., and writes about faith, family, and politics.

THE NEVER-ENDING CHURCH

One Coin Found:
How God's Love Stretches
to the Margins,
by Emmy Kegler

Fortress Press

This is not merely a survivor's memoir; it is a grab-your-Bible-and-learn book; it is a love letter to God and the author's queer family. In her prologue, "Lost," Emmy Kegler sets out her agenda: "I want to tell you about the lost chapter of the Bible, the one with the story of a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep behind and goes out looking for the one that is lost. The one with the story of a woman who sweeps her entire house looking for the one coin that is lost. The one with the lost son who wanders from home and a lost son who stays and stew in his resentment and a lost father struggling to unite his broken family."

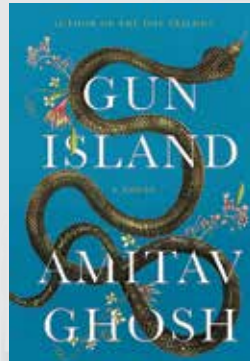
In her first of many footnotes, Kegler identifies Luke 15:1-32 as that "lost" chapter. She spends the rest of her book conveying God's expansive love for all who are deemed lost.

Kegler focuses on details of her story, about how bewildering it was to discover she was gay during the AIDS pandemic, in the year after Matthew Shepard's murder.

BEYOND HUMAN NATURE

Gun Island,
by Amitav Ghosh

Farrar, Straus and Giroux



W

While the climate crisis has reconfigured our relationships with each other, other creatures, and our places, fiction has not. It remains focused on the human's internal, moral journey, as if human life is something circumscribed from the rest of creaturely life. *Gun Island*

is a much-needed antidote to the anthropocentric ideal of the novel, one that meets the age of climate change with stories that are true to the new dimensions of relationships unfolding around us.

In his first novel since his nonfiction masterpiece *The Great Derangement*, in which he laid out a vision for a climate-changed literature, Ghosh illustrates the agency of nature: how in this Anthropocene age, shaped by human activity, our porous lives are intertwined with those of our nonhuman interlocutors, who become increasingly present in our lives through climate-change-driven typhoons, fires, and species migration. He tells a story of stories, not recasting the tales of modernity, but reaching back into Bengali folklore to guide us through this uncanny age. For, as one of *Gun Island*'s characters says, "Only through stories can invisible or inarticulate or silent beings speak to us; it is they who allow the past to reach out to us."

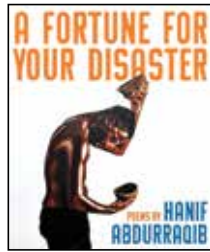
An inescapable connection with the tale of Bonduki Sadagar, the Gun Merchant, sends the novel's narrator, Deen, to three hot spots of climate disasters: the disappearing Sundarbans mangrove forest off the coast of India and Bangladesh, the fiery hills of Southern California, and the flooding canals of Venice, Italy. The visible effects of climate change are inescapable in all three, and yet the ability of people in each region to adapt is vastly different. While the wealthy attendees of a conference at the Getty in Los Angeles are shuffled to a high-end hotel to escape the encroaching flames of a wildfire, the Bengali refugees from the Sundarbans are trapped on an overcrowded boat off the coast of Italy, at risk of sinking with every day they are forbidden to come ashore. The real tragedy of the climate crisis may not be the physical effects, but the social and political hatred that it reveals.

Through all the human-caused pain and suffering of the Anthropocene, however, Ghosh imagines that rather than retreat into modernity and isolate from the lives of our nonhuman neighbors, we might listen to Indigenous tales from around the world, where the despotism of human life is dissolved into a divine dance with all of creation. *Gun Island* tells again the narrative central to so many faith traditions: It is only through the mystery of this sacred entanglement that we might be delivered into a world full of loving, flourishing relationships. ❖

Avery Davis Lamb (@averydavislamb), a writer and activist, is studying the intersection of Christianity and the environment at Duke Divinity School and the Nicholas School of the Environment.

**THE DESPOTISM
OF HUMAN LIFE
IS DISSOLVED INTO
A DIVINE DANCE WITH
ALL OF CREATION.**

ACCURACY AND AMPERSANDS



A Fortune for Your Disaster,
by Hanif Abdurraqib

Tin House Books

Here we learn from the ghost of Marvin Gaye, question the ethics of Nikola Tesla, examine the character of God, and drift in lament and wonder.

In these poems by Hanif Abdurraqib, violence appears in different forms. In some lines, it is a fistfight between teenagers in a schoolyard, in others the anti-Blackness of a suburb or the music industry: “[T]he mailman still hands me bills like I should feel lucky to have my name on anything in this town,” Abdurraqib writes.

Thirteen of the 51 poems are titled after a criticism he heard from a white woman at a poetry reading in 2016: “How can black people write about flowers at a time like this?”

“You might tell me something / about the dandelion head & how it is not a flower itself,” one poem reads, “but a plant made up of many small flowers at its crown / & lord knows I have been called by what I look like / more than I have been called by what I actually am.”

The collection is divided into three parts: “The Pledge,” “The Turn,” and “The Prestige.” However, the structure can seem a bit chaotic with the 13 identically titled poems interspersed at seemingly random increments. Readers may feel that the structure is a puzzle too daunting.

Though the poems are artfully told, their readers need to keep in mind that they deal with realism. There is a long history of commentators reducing Black art to being solely political, only for protest, or simply ethereal. Any reductionist labels are ultimately dehumanizing. In this collection, there is trauma and there is music. There are bullets and there are flowers. ❖

Elisa Crawley (@elmcrawley) is an immigrant, writer, poet, and teacher. Her work has been published in Fathom.

A New Podcast



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Poetry

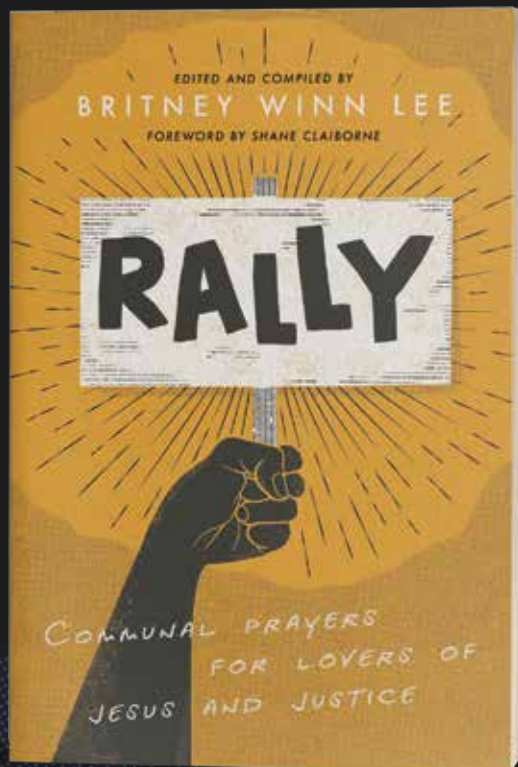
IN THE
BEGINNING

By Elisabeth Ivey



Call this hair crazy.
 but watch as it grows
 outside of your gates
 and beyond the walls
 you've made to contain
 me. See as it reaches
 higher than anything you
 ever thought of me,
 shedding every lie of
 inferiority. Look as I stare,
 unflinching, at myself and hear
 the words of God from the beginning,
 say, "It is good."
 Bear witness as I uproot
 every false belief like weeds
 and make room for something
 true and good and made
 entirely of love.

Elisabeth Ivey is a writer and editor dedicated to precision and the flourishing of creativity.



LORD, STIR US UP TO **HOLY ACTION!**

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—Shane Claiborne, in the foreword

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SOJOURNERS

OUR HUMANITY IS BOUND UP WITH OTHERS

Scripture passages
are from the Revised
Common Lectionary,
Cycle A.

By Valerie Bridgeman



Living the Word

Each of these reflections was written separately, not taking the others into consideration while writing each one. But as I reread them, there is a thread here. It is the thread of what it means

to live faithfully together; what it means to do right by one another. Reflecting on love, accountability, economic justice, and what it means to have a righteous mind, I found myself thinking of each text in communal ways, rather than the ways I confess to typically having thought of them: “What do they mean for *me*, the individual?”

I am more struck by the selfishness I see, in these extraordinary times, when some people flat out refuse to do anything that they believe infringes on their individual rights. I believe that as followers of Jesus we are charged—called—to go beyond ourselves, even if we are socialized differently in our cultures or families. In addition, it is easy to settle into devotions that do not look beyond our own spiritual growth. But in these reflections, I have pushed myself to think about what it means to take in a larger view, to extend personal spiritual growth into the community. In some ways I am trying to reflect the Zulu concept of *ubuntu*, which indicates that a person is only human in relation to other humans. For me, by necessity, that means we must reach beyond ourselves. I hope these reflections will take you to that kind of humanity which, I believe, will deepen your faith in Christ.

Valerie Bridgeman is dean, vice president of academic affairs, and an associate professor of homiletics and Hebrew Bible at Methodist Theological School in Ohio.

A PERSON IS ONLY HUMAN IN RELATION TO OTHER HUMANS.

SEPTEMBER 6

THE LOVE DEBT

EXODUS 12:1-14; PSALM 149;
ROMANS 13:8-14; MATTHEW 18:15-20

“Love” is a landmine word. It has come to mean expressions of sappy, gooey sentimentality. Because of this expectation, requiring the hard “verb” of love as a Christian commitment often gets dismissed. “Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Romans 13:8). Every bit of the Romans text requires something more than good feelings. It calls us to examine our Christian debt. To “do no wrong” in a world where wrong stalks so many means we have to figure out how to “right the wrong.” What can it mean to “owe no one anything but love” when this nation robbed Indigenous Peoples of land and livelihood? It would be easy to say, “That was so long ago,” except the effects of that robbery extend into our present time.

It’s easy enough to name the damage, but how do we repair it? What does it mean to say, “Love does no wrong to a neighbor” (verse 10), when our trans siblings are being murdered and dismembered (as in the case of Dominique Fells in Philadelphia)? How do we provide safety? What does “Love your neighbor as yourself” (verse 9) mean in this Black Lives Matter moment of our culture, as we grapple with centuries-old sin against Black humanity? If we in fact owe one another love, then we owe one another justice, which includes repairing the damages done, individually and collectively, in community. It literally means reparation. It means doing so with an urgency, if we in fact believe “salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers” (verse 11). For some, longing for Christ’s return can be an invitation to ignore the pain of now; but for me, it is the exact opposite. We are called to live honorably, which means to love righteously by “putting Christ on” (verse 14) and being

the active love of God in the world by our deeds. Otherwise, it is not love.

SEPTEMBER 13

FOR THE COMMON GOOD

EXODUS 14:19-31; PSALM 114; ROMANS 14:1-12; MATTHEW 18:21-35

The United States is an individualistic society, which makes it difficult for us culturally to agree on what constitutes the “common good.” Even laws that govern us are tilted in the direction of individual liberty, rather than seeing the freedom of all. Calls for communal action often are met with suspicion that people are being asked to be “socialist,” a term considered toxic in our political climate. These sensibilities also rule in much of U.S. Christianity. But what would it mean to embrace an ethic in which “we do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves” (Romans 14:7)? The Romans text is a “nonconflict” document, trying to help believers mitigate against internal struggles about what is the “right” way to be a believer. Believers are told to be careful about passing judgment on one another, but rather to be “fully convinced in their own minds” (verse 5).

Romans 14, addressed to “God’s beloved in Rome,” is not specifically designed to speak to the way we interact as a society. But if the church is a society, a commonwealth unto itself, then I find this text problematic. It devolves into name-calling, and once we begin to label one another as “weak,” then we create an easy path to reduce interaction with people we believe are either beneath us or above us. We become “fully convinced in [our] own minds”—not just about what day to hold as holy or what to eat, but also about whether one believes anti-Black racism is a “real thing” or whether the coronavirus is a hoax. It becomes easy to dismiss data or science because we are convinced of our own beliefs. Perhaps we shouldn’t pass judgment on religious practices, but we also should not use these words to support complacency about societal ills. Christians could repurpose verse 7 to include deep care for one another when it comes to the common good and take the *laissez-faire* approach to people’s private lives.

SEPTEMBER 20

KIN-DOM ECONOMY

EXODUS 16:2-15; PSALM 105:1-6, 37-45; PHILIPPIANS 1:21-30; MATTHEW 20:1-16

I am a descendant of enslaved people and sharecropping farmers. Agricultural labor is in my recent history, as I grew up on my grandfather’s farm. So, reading Matthew 20:1-16 chafes me. I want to do what interpreters have often done—celebrate the wide grace of God that says, “The last will be first and the first will be last” (verse 16). But I am more with the first laborers who say, “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat” (verse 12). On the sheer matter of equitable wages, they have a point. The abuse of their labor is patently unfair. Yes, they agreed to a certain wage—much like people made poor accept a less-than-living wage because they need a job.

Maybe I am being ungracious to the landowner. Maybe the first laborers jumped at the wage offered them early in the morning because “the usual daily wage” (verse 2) was fair. Maybe they took the work because it was what they could get, much like day laborers standing on corners in U.S. cities wait to be hired.

I presume that setting the text as a parable (“the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner”) is meant to make us overlook these disparities, since we couldn’t possibly hold the “kingdom of heaven” to account. But just because the landowner says “I’m doing you no wrong” doesn’t make it so. Walmart could say the same, while it racked up profits and cut workers. In the middle of a pandemic where “essential workers” are risking their lives so that people who can work from home have what we need, we must read this parable against its intent and hold ourselves accountable. We *must* do so as citizens of the kin-dom of heaven.

IF WE IN FACT OWE ONE ANOTHER LOVE, THEN WE OWE ONE ANOTHER JUSTICE.

SEPTEMBER 27

OUR RIGHTEOUS MINDS

EXODUS 17:1-7; PSALM 78:1-4, 12-16; PHILIPPIANS 2:1-13; MATTHEW 21:23-32

I can still hear my mother’s voice incredulously asking, “Have you lost your righteous mind!?” She used this phrase when one of her children acted in a way that did not match their upbringing. “You know how to act,” she would say. And that was inevitably followed by reminding us of our family line. That is what I read in Paul’s words to the Philippians: a mentor-leader who wants those for whom he cares to gather their “righteous minds” and make his joy complete (2:2).

What does it mean to have the same mind? For years I assumed “unity” meant that there was never any difference in the way people thought or felt. But years of building alliances and relationships has taught me that unity does not mean uniformity—that we can disagree about how a thing ought to happen, but if we are looking after others’ interests and not just our own, we may well be on the road to “full accord.” Diversity is not division, or necessarily dissent. But community is wholeness when we “empty ourselves,” not in a self-defeating or death-dealing way, but in a way that considers how our lives serve the community’s wholeness.

In a world where selfishness and exploitation can be as common as breathing, Paul’s words—“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus”—are compelling, if difficult. We can’t pull them off without realizing that God works in us (verse 13), enabling us to live into shared vision and shared work. We should be careful to humble ourselves, so that we do not yield to a larger vision for the praise we might get from it. If we experience exaltation, it should come from God’s desire. Our Christ-mind will lead us to righteous behavior among and with one another. That alone is a prize. ✕

“Living the Word” reflections for October can be found at sojo.net/magazine. “Preaching the Word,” Sojourners’ online resource for Bible study and sermon preparation, is available at sojo.net/ptw.

H'rumps



FROM HOLLYWOOD ... AND BEYOND

By Ed Spivey Jr.

While desperately perusing the news for anything *not* related to the coronavirus, or the economy, or the fact that we have one last chance to save our democracy—you know, the boring stuff—I read that NASA will be making a movie on the International Space Station, featuring Tom Cruise. The \$150 billion laboratory orbits about 250 miles above the Earth, which is 250 miles farther than was necessary to achieve its principle scientific discovery: Camping in space is expensive.

I could have told them that.

If there were justice in this world, Tom Cruise would instead be making a movie at the Superconducting Super Collider, a much less costly project that could have produced innumerable scientific breakthroughs in physics. Plus, its site in north-central Texas is well known for its ample gravity and breathable air. But Congress canceled it mid-construction in 1993, and the U.S. instead spent more than 10 times as much on the space station.

The collider was my fave project in the 1980s. You want breakthroughs in understanding how our physical world came to be—I used to say at parties—you go with the collider. You want to watch an astronaut drink upside down—I would add, ruefully, at that same party—then the space station is your boondoggle of choice.

But since I lobbied for the project mainly at parties instead of, say, congressional budget hearings, we're stuck with the space station. (Too late I realized my considerable influence was directed at the wrong people, just because they had beer.)

But now that we're stuck with it, we might as well make a movie on it. And Tom Cruise is probably the right choice.

IF WE'RE SENDING AN ACTOR TO SPACE, DOES IT HAVE TO BE AN A-LISTER?

He already made *War of the Worlds*, a film about defeating aliens (and with the recent discovery of regular microbursts from deep space, there's definitely intelligent life out there we may have to deal with). Although in the movie Cruise didn't personally defeat the aliens; common bacteria did the trick. (Note to aliens: Bacteria *schmacteria*. We've got a virus now that's so bad the CDC recommends you get no closer than the Big Dipper.)

One has to admire Cruise's gutsy plan to launch into near-Earth orbit. It's not *that* near. Yes, 250 miles from Hollywood will get you almost to Las Vegas, with some nice scenery on the way. But straight up from Cape Canaveral—pulling three Gs and guaranteeing bad hair on arrival—may have him wishing he'd never listened to his agent.

Given the harsh conditions of space, the film can't include some of the signature scenes of a Cruise movie. For example, how do you have a car chase when you can't get a car up in space? I mean, *another* car. Elon Musk already sent a Tesla Roadster into Earth's orbit. But the standard orbital speed of 17,000 mph might make it difficult for pedestrians to jump out of the way when Cruise crashes through a colorful open-air market in hot pursuit of the bad guys. In the tight confines of the space station, the only action will be drinking water upside down, dramatically. It's fun to watch, but probably not worth the ticket price, which is \$150,000,000,000 plus your monthly Netflix fee.

Hollywood's trip to the space station is still in the early planning stages, but there's no problem in fast-tracking it. Recent White House rollbacks of regulations will minimize time-consuming quality control and those troublesome safety checks. As a result, the ship may rattle a bit on takeoff and lose a couple parts over the Atlantic. But there's always duct tape. ✖

Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of *Sojourners* magazine.

A call to reimagine public safety.



Christian Smuterman / Sojourners

The inaugural gathering of the Theology and Racialized Policing Cohort, Washington, D.C., November 2020

Black people, Indigenous people, and other communities of color are disproportionately targeted by a broken criminal justice system—the product of centuries of institutional racism. Police shootings of unarmed Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color must stop.

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NIKOLE LIM

WOMEN UNCOVERING HOPE
IN A BROKEN WORLD

LIBERATION IS HERE



Learn from the stories
of brave women around
the world who are breaking
the cycle of violence and
experiencing healing and
liberation from oppression.



NIKOLE LIM is the cofounder and international director of Freely In Hope, a nonprofit organization seeking to restore dignity to survivors of sexual violence. As a filmmaker, she advocates alongside the courageous survivors whose lives she captures on camera. Nikole consults regularly with organizations like The Salvation Army, International Justice Mission, and Hope International.



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